”Today, many of us live in the most atomized societies in human history, which makes our lives less secure and undermines our ability to organize together to change unjust conditions on a large scale. We are put in competition with each other for survival, and we are forced to rely on hostile systems—like health care systems designed around profit, not keeping people healthy, or food and transportation systems that pollute the earth and poison people—for the things we need. More and more people report that they have no one they can confide in when they are in trouble. This means many of us do not get help with mental health, drug use, family violence, or abuse until the police or courts are involved, which tends to escalate rather than resolve harm.

In this context of social isolation and forced dependency on hostile systems, mutual aid—where we choose to help each other out, share things, and put time and resources into caring for the most vulnerable—is a radical act.”

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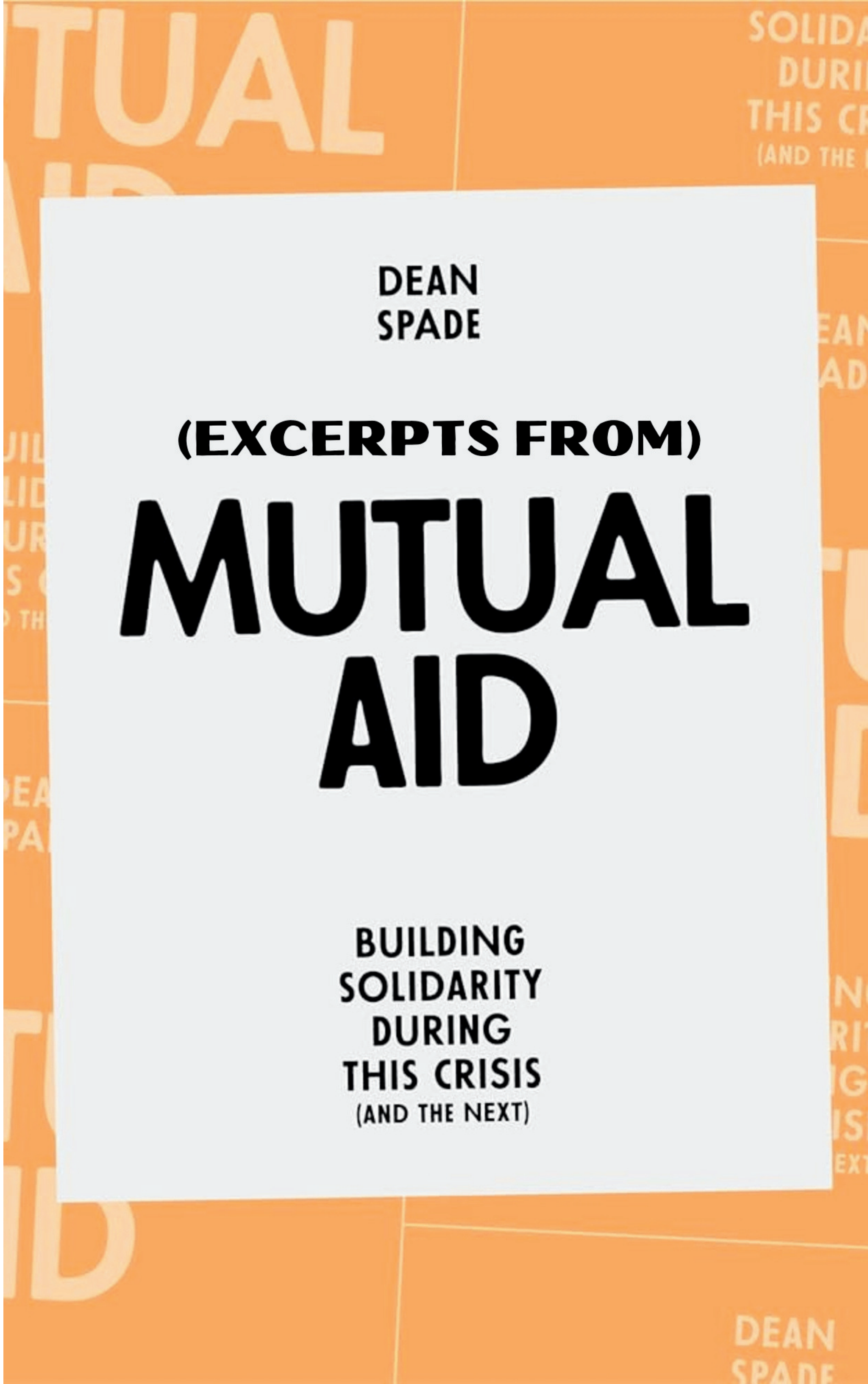
Knowledge must be presented in a manner that
enlarges the horizon instead of restricting it.
-Louise Michel



DEAN
SPADE

(EXCERPTS FROM)
MUTUAL AID

BUILDING
SOLIDARITY
DURING
THIS CRISIS
(AND THE NEXT)

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This is an excerpt of Dean Spade's book, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During this Crisis (and the Next)*.

The complete text is available for free online at: https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/dean-spade-mutual-aid

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and bolder as experiences with our shared authority emancipate us from the illegitimate authority of dominant systems. This has been visible in increasing actions to protect immigrants from ICE arrests. In July of 2019, community members in Nashville, Tennessee, surrounded a man in his car to protect him from ICE agents who had come for him. At the same time, mutual aid groups all over the country were organizing to hide immigrants, to warn immigrants of coming ICE raids, to care for the families of detainees and deportees, and to block buses leaving immigration prisons to bring people to airports for deportation. These same groups were also often tied in with campaigns to shut down the immigration prison in their region or stop the building or expansion of an immigration prison, to get local ordinances to ban ICE from using local airports for deportation, to block collaboration between ICE and local law enforcement in various ways, or to withdraw the business license of a private prison used to cage immigrants.

Mutual aid work plays an immediate role in helping us get through crises, but it also has the potential to build the skills and capacities we need for an entirely new way of living at a moment when we must transform our society or face intensive, uneven suffering followed by species extinction. As we deliver groceries, participate in meetings, sew masks, write letters to prisoners, apply bandages, facilitate relationship skills classes, learn how to protect our work from surveillance, plant gardens, and change diapers, we are strengthening our ability to outnumber the police and military, protect our communities, and build systems that make sure everyone can have food, housing, medicine, dignity, connection, belonging, and creativity in their lives. That is the world we are fighting for. That is the world we can win.

At the same time that the mobilizations against policing and for Black lives were growing, scientists announced that May 2020 had been the hottest May on record and that 2020, like the ten preceding years, would likely be another record-breakingly hot year; the Trump administration announced it intended to open the Atlantic Maritime Monument to commercial fishing and waive environmental review for infrastructure projects; the EPA slashed clean water protections; climate change–induced permafrost melt caused the largest oil spill in Russia's history; and scientists announced that carbon dioxide levels were at a record high despite reduced emissions during the pandemic. Everywhere we look, we see signs that the systems we have been living under are collapsing, and something new must emerge if we are to survive.

As the world faces the ongoing crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, a worsening economic depression, climate change, and domination by illegitimate and racist policing, criminalization, and border enforcement systems and militaries, it is clear that mutual aid projects are essential to the broader ecosystem of political action. Mutual aid helps people survive disasters of all kinds, mobilizes and politicizes new people, and builds the new systems and ways of being together that we need. The stronger we build our mutual aid projects, the more lasting our mobilizations can be.

Mutual aid is essential to the other tactics that make up our movements, not only because it is the way to onboard millions of new people into lasting movement participation, but also because it supports all the other strategies. Decades of work developing transformative justice projects provide an alternative vision for community support as we push to end police budgets and redirect resources toward human need. Bail funds, legal defense campaigns, and prison letter-writing projects support those criminalized for bold actions against the police and corporations. Street medics treating tear gas and rubber bullet injuries make street battles with police for days on end possible. Healing justice projects and conflict mediation projects help us live together in police-free zones. Mutual aid is essential to all of our resistance work.

Ideally, our experiments with mutual aid and solidarity become bolder

PART I. What is mutual aid?

Mutual aid is collective coordination to meet each other's needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them. Those systems, in fact, have often created the crisis, or are making things worse. We see examples of mutual aid in every single social movement, whether it's people raising money for workers on strike, setting up a ride-sharing system during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, putting drinking water in the desert for migrants crossing the border, training each other in emergency medicine because ambulance response time in poor neighborhoods is too slow, raising money to pay for abortions for those who can't afford them, or coordinating letter-writing to prisoners. These are mutual aid projects. They directly meet people's survival needs, and are based on a shared understanding that the conditions in which we are made to live are unjust.

There is nothing new about mutual aid—people have worked together to survive for all of human history. But capitalism and colonialism created structures that have disrupted how people have historically connected with each other and shared everything they needed to survive. As people were forced into systems of wage labor and private property, and wealth became increasingly concentrated, our ways of caring for each other have become more and more tenuous.

Today, many of us live in the most atomized societies in human history, which makes our lives less secure and undermines our ability to organize together to change unjust conditions on a large scale. We are put in competition with each other for survival, and we are forced to rely on hostile systems—like health care systems designed around profit, not keeping people healthy, or food and transportation systems that pollute the earth and poison people—for the things we need. More and more people report that they have no one they can confide in when they are in trouble. This means many of us do not get help with mental health, drug use, family violence, or abuse until the police or courts are involved, which tends to escalate rather than resolve harm.
In this context of social isolation and forced dependency on hostile systems, mutual aid—where we choose to help each other out, share things, and put time and resources into caring for the most vulnerable—is a radical act.

Three Key Elements of Mutual Aid

One. Mutual aid projects work to meet survival needs and build shared understanding about why people do not have what they need.

Mutual aid projects expose the reality that people do not have what they need and propose that we can address this injustice together. The most famous example in the United States is the Black Panther Party's survival programs, which ran throughout the 1960s and 1970s, including a free breakfast program, free ambulance program, free medical clinics, a service offering rides to elderly people doing errands, and a school aimed at providing a rigorous liberation curriculum to children. The Black Panther programs welcomed people into the liberation struggle by creating spaces where they could meet basic needs and build a shared analysis about the conditions they were facing. Instead of feeling ashamed about not being able to feed their kids in a culture that blames poor people, especially poor Black people, for their poverty, people attending the Panthers' free breakfast program got food and a chance to build shared analysis about Black poverty. It broke stigma and isolation, met material needs, and got people fired up to work together for change.

During the same period, the Young Lords Party undertook similar and related mutual aid projects in their work toward Puerto Rican liberation. They protested the lack of garbage pickups in Puerto Rican neighborhoods, hijacked a city mobile x-ray truck to bring greater tuberculosis testing to Puerto Rican communities, took over part of a hospital to provide health care, and provided food and youth programs for Puerto Rican communities. Their vision—for decolonizing Puerto Rico and liberating Puerto Ricans in the United States from racism, poverty, and police terror—was put into practice through mutual aid.

Klee Benally, project coordinator at Indigenous Media Action, argues that mutual aid is an unbroken tradition among Indigenous people across many cycles of colonialism, maintained through traditional teachings that contemporary Indigenous mutual aid projects are working to restore and amplify. Settlers have long worked to undermine Indigenous people's self-sustaining practices by first destroying food systems and then forcing dependency on rations given at forts and missions and, now, by settler nonprofits. Indigenous mutual aid efforts are both a matter of survival and a powerful form of resistance to forced dependence on settler systems.

Conclusion:

Everything is at Stake and We're Fighting to Win

> *The only thing that keeps those in power in that position is the illusion of our powerlessness. A moment of freedom and connection can undo a lifetime of social conditioning and scatter seeds in a thousand directions.*
>
> — Mutual Aid Disaster Relief

In May 2020, in the midst of a global pandemic that exposed the brutality of racist, capitalist health systems and the frailty of social safety nets, Minneapolis police brutally murdered George Floyd, sparking global protests against anti-Black racism and police violence. The mutual aid projects that had been mobilizing during the first months of the pandemic became vectors of participation in the growing protests. Millions of people participated in new ways in this moment—providing food, masks, hand sanitizer, water, medical support, and protection to each other while fighting cops and white supremacists in the streets, organizing and supporting funds for criminalized people, pressuring schools and other institutions to cancel contracts with the police, and more. In the first two weeks of the protests alone, an unprecedented 3.5 million people donated to bail funds around the United States. As organizers demanded the defunding and dismantling of police departments, vibrant conversations about transformative justice emerged, with more and more people learning about the possibilities of addressing conflict and violence through mutual aid rather than criminalization.

In Seattle, after days of confrontations police abandoned the East Precinct, and protesters established an autonomous zone around it, taking up several blocks and a park. With the withdrawal of the police and most businesses closed already because of COVID-19, the zone, like earlier Occupy encampments and other similar spaces where protesters have taken public space, became a site of experimentation where practices of governance, co-stewardship, leadership, decision-making, and collective care were being debated and innovated. Mutual aid projects emerged in this space to provide mental health support, food, water, medical care, masks, spiritual support, haircuts, clothing, conflict mediation, and more.

do and maintain their own wellbeing? Did they actually track their hours for a week to make sure they are aware of how much they are working? Assess the workload and scale back projects until the workload is under control. Create a moratorium on new projects until capacity expands. Enforce the moratorium—no one can unilaterally take on new work for the group or for themselves as a member of the group.

4. Build a culture of connection.

How can the group's meeting culture foster well-being, goodwill, connection between members? Eating together, having check-ins with interesting questions about people's favorite foods, plants, movies, or politicizing moments may feel silly at first but makes a big difference. Bringing attention to wellness into the group's culture means helping members be there as multi-dimensional people, rather than just as work or activist machines. People need to build deep enough relationships to actually be able to talk about difficult dynamics that come up, or those dynamics will fester.

5. Make sure that the facilitation of meetings rotates, including agenda-making and other key leadership tasks.

Rotating tasks can help us address unfair workloads and transparency concerns. Making sure everyone is trained on how to facilitate meetings in ways that maximize the participation of all members of the group can help. Whenever there is a danger that just a few people will dominate an important conversation, use a go-around rather than having people volunteer to speak. Quieter members speaking up can really change the dynamic.

6. As a group, recognize the conditions creating a culture of overwork.

It is not one person's fault, and everyone may be feeling the different forms of pressure. Have one or many facilitated discussions about the pressures and dynamics that lead to overwork or to an individual's dominating or disappearing behavior. Create a shared language for the pressures the members may be under so they are easier to identify and address moving forward.

Two. Mutual aid projects mobilize people, expand solidarity, and build movements.

Mutual aid is essential to building social movements. People often come to social movement groups because they need something: eviction defense, childcare, social connection, health care, or help in a fight with the government about something like welfare benefits, disability services, immigration status, or custody of their children. Being able to get help in a crisis is often a condition for being politically active, because it's very difficult to organize when you are also struggling to survive. Getting support through a mutual aid project that has a political analysis of the conditions that produced your crisis also helps to break stigma, shame, and isolation. Under capitalism, social problems resulting from exploitation and the maldistribution of resources are understood as individual moral failings, not systemic problems. Getting support at a place that sees the systems, not the people suffering in them, as the problem can help people move from shame to anger and defiance. Mutual aid exposes the failures of the current system and shows an alternative. This work is based in a belief that those on the front lines of a crisis have the best wisdom to solve the problems, and that collective action is the way forward.

Mutual aid projects also build solidarity. Solidarity is what builds and connects large-scale movements. In the context of professionalized nonprofit organizations, groups are urged to be single-issue oriented, framing their message around "deserving" people within the population they serve, and using tactics palatable to elites. This narrow focus actually strengthens the system's legitimacy by advocating that the targeting of those more stigmatized people is okay.

Solidarity across issues and populations is what makes movements big and powerful. Without that connection, we end up with disconnected groups, working in their issue silos, undermining each other, competing for attention and funding, not backing each other up and not building power. Mutual aid projects, by creating spaces where people come together on the basis of some shared need or concern in spite of their different lived experience, cultivate solidarity.

Groups doing mutual aid to directly address real problems in real people's lives tend to develop a multi-issue and solidarity-based approach because their members' lives are cross-cut by many different experiences of vulnerability. Sometimes even groups that start out with a narrow goal adopt a wider horizon of solidarity and a wider vision of political possibility if they use the mutual aid model. An initial goal of serving people impacted by homelessness quickly reveals that racism, colonialism, immigration enforcement, ableism, police violence, the foster care system, the health care system, transphobia, and more are all causes of homelessness or causes of further harm to homeless people. Solidarity and an ever-expanding commitment to justice emerge from contact with the complex realities of injustice. This is exactly how movements are built, as people become connected to each other and as one urgent issue unspools into a broader vision of social transformation.

Three. Mutual aid projects are participatory, solving problems through collective action rather than waiting for saviors.

Mutual aid projects help people develop skills for collaboration, participation, and decision-making. For example, people engaged in a project to help one another through housing court proceedings will learn the details of how the system harms people and how to fight it, but they will also learn about meeting facilitation, working across differences, retaining volunteers, addressing conflict, giving and receiving feedback, following through, and coordinating schedules and transportation. They may also learn that it is not just lawyers who can do this kind of work, and that many people—including themselves!—have something to offer. This departs from expertise-based social services that tell us we need to have a social worker, licensed therapist, lawyer, or some other person with an advanced degree to get things done.

Mutual aid is inherently antiauthoritarian, demonstrating how we can do things together in ways we were told not to imagine, and that we can organize human activity without coercion. Most people have never been to a meeting where there was not a boss or authority figure with decision-making power. Most people work or go to school inside hierarchies where disobedience leads to punishment or exclusion. We bring our learned practices of hierarchy with us even when no paycheck or punishment enforces our participation, so even in volunteer groups we often find ourselves in conflicts stemming from learned dominance behaviors. But collective spaces can give us

- Dismissal of the significance of group process and overvaluation of how the group is perceived by outsiders such as funders, elites, and others.
- Being flaky or unreliable.
- Being defensive about all of the above and unwilling to hear critique. “I’m doing so much, I’m killing myself with work. How can you critique me? I can’t possibly do any better/more!”
- Shame about experiencing all of the above.

How Mutual Aid Groups Can Prevent and Address Overwork and Burnout

Overwork is pervasive in mutual aid groups, and if we can move away from shaming and blaming ourselves and others and toward acknowledging it, we can support change. It is hard to confront another person about behavior that is harmful, and it is hard to be confronted about harmful behavior and listen to what is being said. The ideas below do not change that, but they may help individuals or groups create concrete steps to address the problems.

1. Make internal problems a top priority.

The group cannot do its important work if it is falling apart inside, and it cannot do its work well if it is promising to do work it does not have the capacity to do. The internal concerns cannot wait until later, because the giant need the group exists to fill is probably not going to be reduced in the immediate future. This does not mean the group’s work needs to stop, but it may mean calling a moratorium on new projects and commitments so that the situation does not worsen, and so that people can carve out time for working on internal problems.

2. Make sure that new people are welcomed and trained to co-lead.

This means new people are given a full background on the group’s work, understand that they are being asked to fully participate in all decisions, and have space to ask any questions they need to in order to participate. Ensuring that everyone is getting access to what it takes to co-lead is essential to building leadership among more people. Group members and the group as a whole will be better off if many people are leading, not just one or two.

3. Establish mechanisms to assess the workload and scale back.

How many hours is each member working? Is it beyond what they can

Signs of Overwork and Burnout

- High stress when thinking about tasks being performed by someone else who might do it differently, or the group coming to a different decision than we would make.
- Feelings of resentment: “I’ve done the most for this group” or “I work harder than anyone else.” This can include creating a damaging group culture of competition about who works the hardest.
- Not respecting group agreements or group process because we feel above the process as the founder or the hardest worker.
- Feelings of competition with other groups that are politically aligned or with other issues or activists that we perceive as receiving more support.
- Feelings of martyrdom.
- Desire to endlessly be given credit for our work.
- A desire to take on tasks and responsibilities in order to “be important” to the group or control outcomes.
- Feeling overwhelmed or experiencing depression and/or anxiety.
- Feeling like we “have to” do all these things, cannot see any way to do less work or have less responsibility.
- Inability to let others take on leadership roles.
- Hoarding information or important contacts so that others cannot rise to the same level of leadership (this behavior is usually rationalized in some way).
- A life-and-death feeling that “it must be done the way I do it.” An extreme version of this can result in leaders sabotaging the group or project rather than recognizing that it may be time to step back and take a break from leadership.
- Paranoia and distrust about others in the group or other people working in this kind of work. Feelings of being alone. Feelings of “me against [members of the group/other groups/everyone].”
- Over-promising and under-delivering, which can lead to feeling fraudulent and afraid of being caught so far behind.
- Having feelings of scarcity drive decision-making: “There’s not enough money/time/attention.”
- Having no boundaries with work—working all the time, during meals, first thing upon waking and last before sleeping, during time that was supposed to be for connecting with loved ones. Not knowing how to do anything besides work. Not having fun or feeling relaxed on vacation or days off.

opportunities to unlearn conditioning and build new skills and capacities. By participating in groups in new ways and practicing new ways of being together, we are both building the world we want and becoming the kind of people who could live in such a world together.

Mutual aid can also generate boldness and a willingness to defy illegitimate authority. Taking risks with a group for a shared purpose can be a reparative experience when we have been trained to follow rules. When dominant ways of living have been suspended, people discover that they can break norms—and even laws—that enable individualism, passivity, and respect for private property.

Mutual aid projects providing relief to survivors of storms, floods, earthquakes, and fires, as well as those developed to support people living through the crises caused by poverty, racism, criminalization, gender violence, and other “ordinary” conditions, produce new systems that can prevent harm and improve preparedness for the coming disasters. Doing so helps us imagine getting rid of the undemocratic infrastructure of our lives—the extractive and unjust energy, food, health care, and transportation systems—and replacing it with people’s infrastructure. For social movements working to imagine and build a transition from “dig, burn, dump” economies to sustainable, regenerative ways of living, mutual aid offers a way forward.

Solidarity Not Charity!

Mainstream understanding of how to support people in crisis relies on the frameworks of charity and social services. We should be very clear: mutual aid is not charity. Charity, aid, relief, and social services are terms that usually refer to rich people or the government making decisions about the provision of some kind of support to poor people—that is, rich people or the government deciding who gets the help, what the limits are to that help, and what strings are attached. You can be sure that help like that is not designed to get to the root causes of poverty and violence. It is designed to help improve the image of the elites who are funding it and put a tiny, inadequate Band-Aid on the massive social wound that their greed creates.

The charity model we live with today has origins in Christian European practices of the wealthy giving alms to the poor to buy their own way into heaven. It is based on a moral hierarchy of wealth—the idea that rich people are inherently better and more moral than poor people, which is why they deserve to be on top. Not surprisingly, the charity model promotes the idea that most poverty is a result of laziness or immorality and that only the poor people who can prove their moral worth deserve help.

Charity is increasingly privatized and contracted out to the massive nonprofit sector, which benefits rich people more than poor people in two big ways. First, elite donors get to run the show. They decide what gets funded and what doesn't. Nonprofits compete to show that they are the best organization to win a grant. To win, nonprofits want to make their work look legitimate to the funder, which means working according to the funder's beliefs about the causes of and solutions for a particular problem rather than challenging those beliefs. Nonprofits also seek to make themselves look "successful" and "impactful," regardless of whether their work is actually getting to the root causes of the problem.

Second, the nonprofit system creates a tax shelter for rich people. They can put a bunch of their money in a charitable foundation, allowing them to avoid paying taxes on it and instead getting to direct it to their favorite pet projects.

The creation of the nonprofit sector that has ballooned in the last half-century was a direct response to the threat posed by mass mutual aid work of the 1960s and '70s. The nonprofits that purport to address poverty are mostly run by white elites. The idea promoted by nonprofits and universities is that people with advanced degrees are best suited to figure out the solutions to social problems. But any poor person knows that poverty is caused by the greed of their bosses and landlords, by systems of white supremacy and colonialism, and by wars and forced migrations. Elite solutions to poverty are always about managing poor people and never about redistributing wealth.

The nonprofit sector not only fails to fix injustice but also replicates it within the groups themselves. Nonprofits are usually run like businesses, with a boss (executive director) at the top deciding things

Burnout

Burnout is a reason people often give for why they leave mutual aid groups. Burnout is more than just exhaustion that comes from working too hard. Most often, people I meet who describe themselves as burnt out have been through painful conflict in a group they were working with and quit because they were hurt and unsatisfied by how it turned out. Burnout is the combination of resentment, exhaustion, shame, and frustration that make us lose connection to pleasure and passion in the work and instead encounter difficult feelings like avoidance, compulsion, control, and anxiety. If it were just exhaustion, we could take a break and rest and go back, but people who feel burnt out often feel they cannot return to the work, or that the group or work they were part of is toxic.

These feelings and behaviors are reasonable results of the conditions under which we do our work. We are steeped in a capitalist, patriarchal, white supremacist culture that encourages us to compete, distrust, hoard, hide, disconnect, and confine our value to how others see us and what we produce. Our work is under-resourced in important ways. Many of us come to the work because of our own experiences of poverty or violence, and doing this work can activate old wounds and survival responses. We come to the work to heal ourselves and the world, but we often do the work in ways that further harm ourselves and impede our contribution to the resistance. When our groups are focused on getting important things done "out there," there is rarely room to process our strong feelings or admit that we do not know how to navigate our roles "in here."

Burnout is created or worsened when we feel disconnected from others, mistreated, misunderstood, ashamed, overburdened, obsessed with outcomes, perfectionist, or controlling. Burnout is prevented or lessened when we feel connected to others, when there is transparency in how we work together, when we can rest as needed, when we feel appreciated by the group, and when we have skills for giving and receiving feedback. There are several things that groups can do to cultivate conditions that prevent, reduce, or respond to burnout, and there are things that individuals experiencing burnout can do. Before people who are burnt out leave groups, they often cause a lot of disruption and damage, so this section is also aimed at reducing the harm that burnt-out or overworked people can cause.

attaching strings to grant money and trying to control the direction of the work. Grassroots fundraising can help build a sense that the community controls the organizations rather than an elite funder, and doing grassroots fundraising can be a way of spreading the ideas of the group and raising awareness about the problems the group works on. However, even if money is raised in this way, managing money still comes with pitfalls.

Handling money brings logistical issues that can cause stress and take time, such as figuring out how to do it fairly and transparently and figuring out how to avoid a problem with the IRS or otherwise expose group members to legal problems. Because most people in our society have a tangled, painful relationship with money that includes feelings and behaviors of secrecy, shame, and desperation, a lot of otherwise awesome people will misbehave when money is around or get suspicious of others' behavior.

To get funding, groups may want to become nonprofits by applying to the IRS, or get a nonprofit fiscal sponsor so that they can receive grants and/or tax-deductible donations. The downside is that this requires financial tracking and administration skills. Becoming a nonprofit sometimes concentrates power in the hands of people who have had more access to these skills and systems, such as white people, people with more formal education, and people with professional experience.

There can certainly be good reasons to seek funding and have paid staff roles, but these steps should be taken with caution and with a focus on building transparent and accountable systems regarding money and decision-making. At least two people should always be working together on tracking funds to help prevent theft. How money is earned and spent should be clear to all group participants. The group's values should guide how money is spent. Having clear and transparent budgeting and planning processes that can be understood by all participants so everyone can weigh in and make decisions together will help prevent the group from shrinking to become staff-centered, small, and likely less mobilizing and relevant. The more that people in the group can be aware of the dangers of institutionalization and philanthropic control, the more likely the group can stay committed to its purpose and principles when handling money.

for the people underneath. Nonprofits have the same kinds of problems as other businesses that rely on hierarchical models: drastically unequal pay, race and gender wage gaps, sexual harassment in the workplace, exploitation of workers, and burnout. Despite the fact that they pitch themselves as the solution for fixing the problems of the current system, nonprofits mostly replicate, legitimize, and stabilize that system.

One way the charity model is manifested is in the idea of “having a cause.” This idea of a charitable cause that is disconnected from other aspects of life keeps us in our places. We are encouraged to be mostly numbed-out consumers, but ones who perhaps volunteer at a soup kitchen on Thanksgiving, post videos about animal rights on our social media accounts, or wear a T-shirt with a feminist slogan now and again. Only those few experts or specialists who work in nonprofits are supposed to make concern for justice a larger part of their lives by turning it into a career, but even they are supposed to still be obedient consumers.

The false separation of politics and injustice from ordinary life—and the idea that activism is a kind of lifestyle accessory—is demobilizing to our movements, hides the root causes of injustice, and keeps us passive and complicit. Robust social movements offer an opposing view. We argue that all the aspects of our lives—where and how we live and work, eat, entertain ourselves, get around, and get by are sites of injustice and potential resistance. At our best, social movements create vibrant social networks in which we not only do work in a group, but also have friendships, make art, have sex, mentor and parent kids, feed ourselves and each other, build radical land and housing experiments, and inspire each other about how we can cultivate liberation in all aspects of our lives. Activism and mutual aid shouldn't feel like volunteering or like a hobby—it should feel like living in alignment with our hopes for the world and with our passions. It should enliven us.

The charity model encourages us to feel good about ourselves by “giving back.” Convincing us that we have done enough if we do a little volunteering or posting online is a great way to keep us in our place. Keeping people numb to the suffering in the world—and their own suffering—is essential to keeping things as they are.

Mutual aid projects, in many ways, are defined in opposition to the charity model and its current iteration in the nonprofit sector. Mutual aid projects mobilize lots of people rather than a few experts; resist the use of eligibility criteria that cut out more stigmatized people; are an integrated part of our lives rather than a pet cause; and cultivate a shared analysis of the root causes of the problem and connect people to social movements that can address these causes.

What we build now, and whether we can sustain it, will determine how prepared we are for the next pandemic, the climate-induced disasters to come, the ongoing disasters of white supremacy and capitalism, and the beautifully disruptive rebellions that will transform them.

PART II. Working Together on Purpose

Mutual aid work is important for meeting people's survival needs right now, and for mobilizing hundreds of millions of people to join struggles for justice and liberation. Most people newly fired up about injustice are eager to work on the conditions happening to them or to people they care about. Mutual aid projects are the on-ramp for people to get to work right away on things they feel urgent about, plug into social movements where they can learn more about things they are not yet mad about, and build new solidarities.

Some dangers and pitfalls of mutual aid.

Even while they explicitly work to reject the charity model, mutual aid projects can slip into some of the well-worn grooves of that model if we don't root deeply in our principles and practice careful discernment. Mutual aid groups face four dangerous tendencies: dividing people into those who are deserving and undeserving of help, practicing saviorism, being co-opted, and collaborating with efforts to eliminate public infrastructure and replace it with private enterprise and volunteerism.

Deserving hierarchies

People start mutual aid projects because existing programs or other services are not meeting people's needs, and often are leaving out

A Cautionary Note on Fame

Social media has encouraged our individualism and has enhanced the desire to "brand" ourselves as radical or as having the "right" politics. It is in the interest of corporations like Facebook and Twitter that we spend as much time as possible creating free content for them, and that we feel compelled to get approval on their platforms. All of this can motivate us to want to be perceived to be doing things, rather than actually doing them. Much mutual aid work is very ordinary, sometimes boring, and often difficult.

When we get our sense of self from fame, status, or approval from a bunch of strangers, we're in trouble. It is hard to stick to our principles and treat others well when we are seeking praise and attention. If we are to redefine leadership away from individualism, competition, and social climbing, we have to become people who care about ourselves as part of the greater whole. It means moving from materialist self-love, which is often very self-critical ("I will be okay and deserve love when I look right, when others approve of me, when I am famous") and toward a deep belief that everyone, including ourselves, deserves dignity, belonging, and safety just because we are alive.

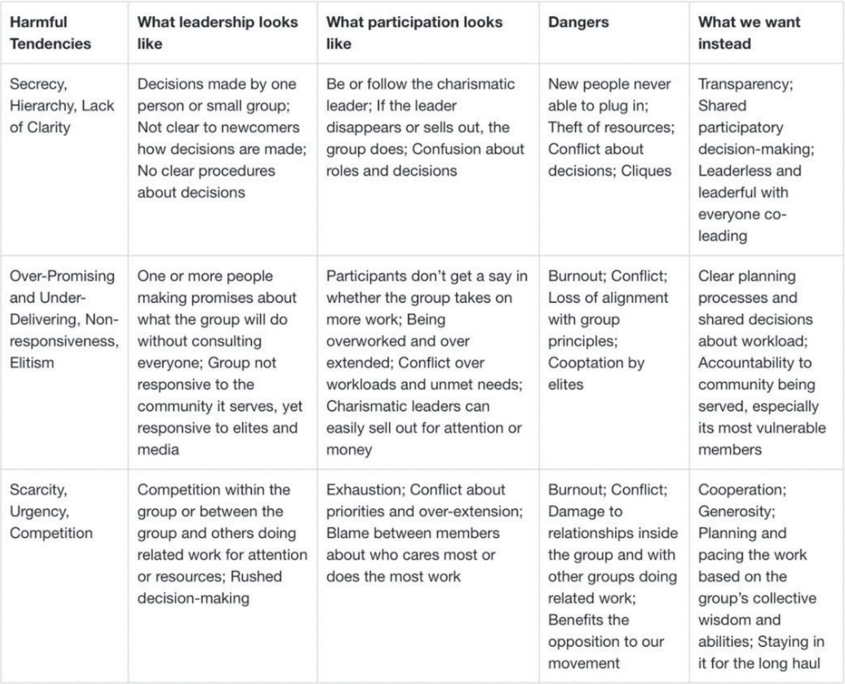
This is a lifelong unlearning practice because we have all been shaped by systems that make us insecure, approval-seeking, individualist, and sometimes shallow. Yet we also all have the deeply human desire to connect with others, to be of service in ways that reduce suffering, and to be seen and loved by those who truly know us and whom we love. Mutual aid groups are a place where we can notice these learned instincts and drives in ourselves and unlearn them—that is, make choices to act out of mutuality and care on purpose.

Handling money

Handling money can be one of the most contentious issues for mutual aid groups. Because of this, it can be very useful for groups to consider whether this is something they want to do. Some groups can do their work without raising money at all. Some groups can do their work just raising money through grassroots fundraising in their communities, taking small donations from many people. That kind of fundraising can avoid the problem with grant-making foundations

Clear structures help us stick to our values under pressure—and we've already looked at many of the larger pitfalls that mutual aid groups can fall into, so we know what's at stake. In groups that aren't clear about decision-making, it is much easier for a leader to get seduced by money or prestige and sell out a group's core values for a job, a grant, or a moment in the spotlight. It is easier for law enforcement to infiltrate and destroy the group. It is also easier for participants to get burnt out on organizing. As I'll discuss below, burnout is often caused by conflict or by a failure to delegate decisions and tasks. A clear structure can help prevent conflict or provide ways to move through it, and can help make sure that people are sharing responsibility.

Chart 3. Tendencies that Harm Groups



Harmful Tendencies	What leadership looks like	What participation looks like	Dangers	What we want instead
Secrecy, Hierarchy, Lack of Clarity	Decisions made by one person or small group; Not clear to newcomers how decisions are made; No clear procedures about decisions	Be or follow the charismatic leader; If the leader disappears or sells out, the group does; Confusion about roles and decisions	New people never able to plug in; Theft of resources; Conflict about decisions; Cliques	Transparency; Shared participatory decision-making; Leaderless and leaderful with everyone co-leading
Over-Promising and Under-Delivering, Non-responsiveness, Elitism	One or more people making promises about what the group will do without consulting everyone; Group not responsive to the community it serves, yet responsive to elites and media	Participants don't get a say in whether the group takes on more work; Being overworked and over extended; Conflict over workloads and unmet needs; Charismatic leaders can easily sell out for attention or money	Burnout; Conflict; Loss of alignment with group principles; Cooptation by elites	Clear planning processes and shared decisions about workload; Accountability to community being served, especially its most vulnerable members
Scarcity, Urgency, Competition	Competition within the group or between the group and others doing related work for attention or resources; Rushed decision-making	Exhaustion; Conflict about priorities and over-extension; Blame between members about who cares most or does the most work	Burnout; Conflict; Damage to relationships inside the group and with other groups doing related work; Benefits the opposition to our movement	Cooperation; Generosity; Planning and pacing the work based on the group's collective wisdom and abilities; Staying in it for the long haul

particular groups of vulnerable people. As I argued above, state and nonprofit disaster recovery and social services models generally work to stabilize the existing distribution of wealth, not transform it, so it makes sense that they provide little or nothing to the poorest people.

During the initial COVID-19 outbreak in the United States, the federal government offered loans for businesses suffering economic losses. Almost immediately, stories broke about how giant corporations like Shake Shack and Potbelly received millions while small businesses owned by people of color received the least. Among individual workers, those with the most precarious jobs were cut out of unemployment benefits and the stimulus checks that were supposed to provide relief. Undocumented people were ineligible for relief. Disaster relief and poor relief are designed to uphold and worsen inequalities. Deservingness narratives justify those designs.

Even though mutual aid projects often emerge because of an awareness of how relief programs exclude people marked "undeserving" or "ineligible," mutual aid groups still sometimes set up their own problematic deservingness hierarchies. For example, mutual aid projects replicate moralizing eligibility frameworks when they require sobriety, exclude people with certain types of convictions, only include families with children, or stigmatize and exclude people with psychiatric disabilities for not fitting behavioral norms.

Saviorism and Paternalism

Mutual aid projects must also be wary of saviorism, self-congratulation, and paternalism. Populations facing crisis are cast as in need of saving, and their saviors are encouraged to use their presumed superiority to make over these people and places, replacing old, dysfunctional ways of being with smarter, more profitable, and more moral ones. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, politicians, non-profiteers, celebrity philanthropists, and corporations conspired to remake the city of New Orleans and the people in it by implementing devastating "innovations" that eliminated public housing, permanently displaced Black residents, privatized schools, and destroyed public health infrastructure. After storms, floods, and fires, there is often this kind of push to "rebuild" in ways that center the plans and dreams of elites and do real harm to the populations who have lost the most.

Mutual aid projects and their individual participants must actively resist savior narratives. These ideas are so pervasive that even those who have a systemic analysis of vulnerability still sometimes fall into the trap. Most mutual aid projects benefit from an explicit ongoing effort to build shared analysis among participants about the harms of saviorism and the necessity of self-determination for people in crisis.

Co-optation

For decades, politicians have combined attacks on public infrastructure and public services with an endorsement of privatization and volunteerism. Alongside the destruction of public welfare, public-private partnerships are celebrated and bolstered by the fiction that everything from hospitals to prisons to city governments should be "run like a business." The prevailing myth is that business models are more "efficient." The truth is that making everything profit-centered, as we've seen with our health care system, actually degrades the care that people receive, as businesses seek short-term gains at any expense.

In this atmosphere, mutual aid projects have to work hard to remain oppositional to the status quo and cultivate resistance, rather than becoming complementary to privatization. Politicians and CEOs love the idea of volunteerism replacing a social safety net. If we don't design mutual aid projects with care, we can fit right into this conservative dream.

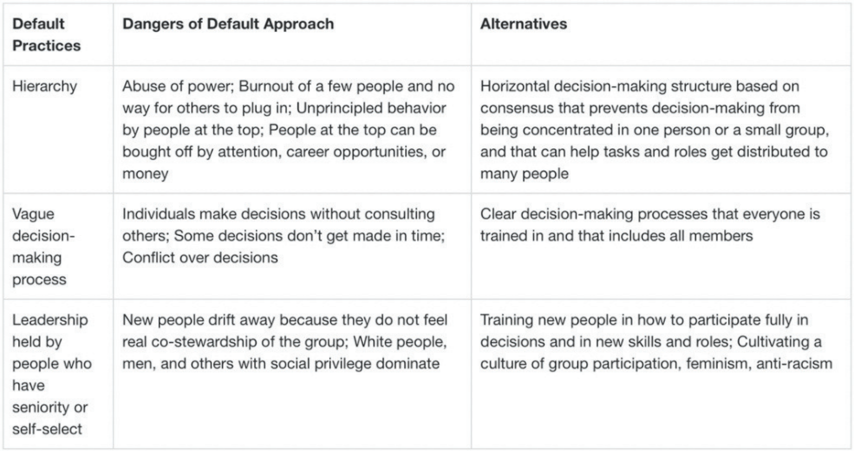
We can see this struggle to resist co-optation in the work of mutual aid projects that support people who have been criminalized. Programs that divert some arrestees from the criminal system to social services or drug treatment, or that provide mediation between people who have done harm and those they have harmed as an alternative to the criminal legal process, can keep people out of jail or prison. However, they can also become non-disruptive adjuncts to carceral control, as they professionalize and become funded and shaped by police and courts. In Seattle, for example, throughout a seven-year fight to stop the building of a new youth jail, public officials have relentlessly used the small diversion programs run primarily by people of color—which receive minimal amounts of public funding—as cover to argue that King County has already addressed concerns about youth incarceration through progressive work with community partners. They

selfie with Angela Davis at the big event, but many people are less interested in the months of meetings where we coordinate how to pull off that event according to our values and handle the challenges of organizing.

But we must build strong structures for our projects if we want this work to be effective at saving lives and mobilizing people. This is essential to any effort to address injustice. Building efficient, participatory, transparent decision-making structures and cultures of care and principled action in our groups takes intentional work, but it is crucial for allowing our groups to flourish and win. If we do it right, it can help prevent the conflicts that tend to tear groups apart, divide participants from each other, and drive people away.

Groups are more effective and efficient when participants know how to raise concerns, how to propose ideas, when a decision has been made and by whom, and how to put that decision into practice. People who have gotten to participate in decision-making and feel co-ownership of the project stick around and do the work. People who feel unclear about whether their opinion matters or how to be part of making decisions tend to drift away. Strong structures also help us plug in new people, orient them to the work, train them in skills they need to build, and give them roles they want.

Chart 2. Default Approaches to Organizing Groups



Default Practices	Dangers of Default Approach	Alternatives
Hierarchy	Abuse of power; Burnout of a few people and no way for others to plug in; Unprincipled behavior by people at the top; People at the top can be bought off by attention, career opportunities, or money	Horizontal decision-making structure based on consensus that prevents decision-making from being concentrated in one person or a small group, and that can help tasks and roles get distributed to many people
Vague decision-making process	Individuals make decisions without consulting others; Some decisions don't get made in time; Conflict over decisions	Clear decision-making processes that everyone is trained in and that includes all members
Leadership held by people who have seniority or self-select	New people drift away because they do not feel real co-stewardship of the group; White people, men, and others with social privilege dominate	Training new people in how to participate fully in decisions and in new skills and roles; Cultivating a culture of group participation, feminism, anti-racism

Efforts to flatten hierarchies—e.g., flat wage scales if anyone is paid, training, rotating facilitation roles, language access	Maintaining hierarchies that are typical of the mainstream culture (e.g., lawyers are more valuable and important than non-lawyers)
Values self-determination for people impacted or targeted by harmful social conditions	Offers "help" to the "underprivileged," embraces paternalism, rescue fantasies, and saviorism
Consensus decision-making to maximize everyone's participation,	Person on top (often the executive director) decides things or, in some instances, a board votes and the majority wins
Direct aid work is connected to other tactics, including disruptive tactics aimed at the root causes of distress	Direct aid work disconnected from other tactics, depoliticized, and distanced from disruptive or root causes– oriented tactics
Engagement with the group builds broader political participation, solidarity, mobilization, radicalization	Engagement with the group is not aimed at growing participants' connection to other issues, groups, or struggles for justice; main focus is to meet grant deliverables and give the organization a good public reputation

No masters, no flakes

One downside to the urgency that we bring to our mutual aid work can be that we dive right into the work, very concerned about how many people our project is helping, but fail to create good internal practices for our group to be strong and sustainable. It makes sense that we are not good at creating emancipatory group structures. Most of us have never been in groups that had fair, participatory, transparent structures. We do not have much practice imagining or being in groups where everyone can truly participate in decision-making.

In addition, we are used to being part of groups that ignore ordinary caring labor, much of which is seen as women's work, like cooking and cleaning and conflict mediation, while celebrating only the final, outward-looking evidence of production: the big protest march, the finalized legislation, the release of someone from prison, the media coverage. We have not been taught to notice or care about how things went along the way to a victory, whether people's capacity for confronting the next challenge was improved, or whether it was destroyed through burnout or damaging group dynamics. Capitalism makes us think about short-term gains, not building the long-term capacity for all of our well-being. This can make it easy to go for the quick fix and ignore the damage we might be doing to each other along the way. Many of us think "process is boring." Everyone wants a

have gone so far as to co-opt the ideas of the youth jail opponents, passing legislation stating that the city and county are committed to "zero youth detention." Meanwhile, the County built a youth jail for hundreds of millions of dollars.

Many powerful lessons about co-optation come out of the feminist movement against domestic violence. That movement started with mutual aid projects, such as volunteer-run shelters for violence survivors and defense campaigns for women criminalized for killing their abuser or attacker. Unfortunately, the anti– domestic violence movement emerged at the same time that criminalization was about to balloon in the United States. The mass uprisings of the 1960s and '70s brought a huge crisis of legitimacy to policing. Toward this end, law enforcement sought out alliances with the emerging anti–domestic violence movement, supporting new laws that increased punishment for gender-based violence and providing money for groups willing to cooperate with police.

This drastically changed the anti–domestic violence movement. It shifted from centering volunteer-based, grassroots mutual aid projects to emphasizing larger nonprofits, often run by white people with advanced degrees. These groups increasingly towed the line of a pro-police message and advocated for increased criminalization, meanwhile taking on charity-model approaches that treated people seeking help in punitive and paternalizing ways. This shift increased the criminalization of communities of color, made the services less accessible to the most vulnerable survivors of violence, and provided good public relations for police, prosecutors, and courts.

Notably, these co-optive approaches also failed to reduce gender-based violence. Research has shown that pro-criminalization policy reforms that became popular in this period, like mandatory arrest laws requiring police to make arrests during domestic violence calls, resulted in the arrests of abuse survivors, especially if they were queer, trans, disabled, or people of color. This is a sobering story of how co-optation can undermine our efforts to meet survival needs and cause us to contribute to legitimizing or expanding the very systems that are harming us.

At the same time, these events also produced a vibrant resistance from which we can learn much in developing mutual aid work that resists co-optation. Women of color, working-class and immigrant feminists, and feminists with disabilities have powerfully resisted this shift toward criminalization in the movement against gender violence. They have created mutual aid projects to address harm and violence that refuse to collaborate with police.

This work is often called “community accountability” or “transformative justice.” It includes many innovative strategies developed in mutual aid groups. The goal of this kind of work is to do the things that the criminal punishment approaches fail to do: give the survivor support to heal, give the harm-doer what they need to stop the behavior, and assess how community norms can change to decrease the likelihood of harm in general, such as by providing healthy relationship skills training, addressing a culture of substance misuse, and changing community ideas about sexuality and gender.

Some transformative justice work is focused on prevention, and some is focused on providing support after something happens. Both are mutual aid approaches, since they address immediate survival needs with a recognition that the systems that are supposed to guarantee safety—the cops, prosecutors, and courts—fail to do so and actually make things worse. These mutual aid projects work to build a new world, where people create safety through community building and support each other to stop harmful behavior through connection rather than through caging.

These feminist activists and groups with an antipolice, anti-violence politics also developed much of the analysis that informs this book. They identified how the system of nonprofitization and pressure from funders were pushing anti-violence work toward criminalization, how mutual aid approaches were undermined when domestic violence shelters and hotlines became more like social services, and how the co-optation of anti-violence work undermined solidarity, further endangering communities most targeted by police. Their wisdom can guide us in building successful groups and movements and in resisting co-optation.

Characteristics of Mutual Aid vs Charity

The last half-century of social movement history is full of examples of mutual aid groups that, under pressure from law enforcement, funders, and culture, transformed into charity or social services groups and lost much of their transformative capacity. Here are some guiding questions for mutual aid groups trying to avoid these dangers and pitfalls:

- Who controls our project?
- Who makes decisions about what we do?
- Does any of the funding we receive come with strings attached that limit who we help or how we help?
- Do any of our guidelines about who can participate in our work cut out stigmatized and vulnerable people?
- What is our relationship to law enforcement?
- How do we introduce new people in our group to our approach to law enforcement?

Chart 1. Characteristics of Mutual Aid vs. Charity

Mutual Aid	*Charity*
De-professionalized survival work done by volunteers	Service work staffed by professionals
Beg, borrow, and steal supplies	Grant money for supplies/ philanthropic control of program
Survival work rooted in principles of anti-capitalism, antiimperialism, racial justice, gender justice, disability justice	Siloed single-issue work, serving a particular population or working on one area of policy reform, disconnected from other issues
Open meetings, with as many people making decisions and doing the work as possible	Closed board meetings, governance by professionals or people associated with big institutions or donors, program operated by staff, volunteers not part of high-level decision-making
People participate voluntarily because of their passion about injustice and care for their community	People come looking for a job, wanting to climb a hierarchy, build a career, or become “important”